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ABSTRACT

The fable of the "Donkey and the Stick" is used as an analogy to present day industrial relations problems. The managerial approach of autocratic leadership has long since outlived its usefulness; rewards based along Maslow's hierarchy of needs should be used for employee motivation. The point is made from the fable that employees can't be motivated to work out of fear or threat and that they have certain needs which must be fulfilled by their jobs. The degree to which these needs are fulfilled by the job is the degree to which they will be motivated to work. (DS)

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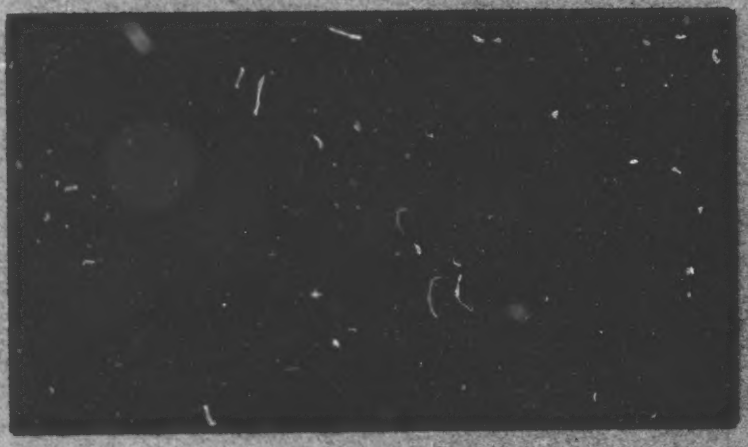

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THE DONKEY AND THE STICK:

REVISITED

by

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THE DONKEY AND THE STICK: REVISITED

by

Clifford E. Smith*

I'm sure we have all read or heard some reference to "the donkey and the stick" when discussing or reading about problems in motivating employees.

I have made some effort to identify the origin of this story or its corollary, "the donkey and the carrot." Fortunately, I was not successful. This provides me the opportunity to write my version of this well-known fable.

My variation on the "the donkey and the stick " theme is a contemporary personnel parable. It goes like this:

Once upon a time, in the "Land of Now" there was a farmer who purchased a donkey. It was a most unusual donkey, as you will soon discover. The fellow who sold the donkey asserted, "He is a very hard worker and will do a good job for you." The farmer was very pleased to have this donkey, but having paid a high price for him, was most anxious to start working him to receive a return on his substantial investment.

The first day of work went fairly well. It wasn't long, however, before the donkey started to slow down and began to balk. The farmer was very annoyed. He decided that he'd better take the appropriate action to make the donkey work

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harder. He found a nice heavy, solid stick, cracked the donkey over the head, and told him to "get with it." The donkey immediately began to work harder.

Things went along fine for awhile until the donkey once again slowed down and balked. This time the farmer had the stick ready. A strategically placed whack got the donkey to work harder.

Now it wasn't long before it required <u>two</u> whacks by the farmer to get the donkey to work, and then a new problem developed. One day, after having to whack the donkey to get him to work, the farmer walked behind the donkey to pick up the reins when all of a sudden, "WAP," the donkey kicked him.

This became the farmer's dilemma. He could get the donkey to work only by use of the stick. However, when he least expected it, the donkey would retaliate and kick him. As you might guess, most farmers don't appreciate getting kicked by the help.

The farmer considered what he might do. First, he could continue to use the stick approach, but it sure smarted when <u>he</u> was kicked. Second, he could sell the donkey and buy another one; but he was afraid he would lose his investment if he did this. Besides, the donkey <u>was</u> a hard worker when motivated. Last, he could use some other behavior on his part to make the donkey work.

The farmer, having a certain amount of good sense, decided that he should obtain expert advice regarding what action to take. So, he went to the "Beloved Sage," a wise old man, and told him his story and asked him what he would recommend. The Sage thought a minute and then said, "It's very simple; give the donkey a carrot."

So the farmer returned home and said, "All right . . . we'll use a carrot to make the donkey work." He found a long stick and put a carrot on the end of the stick. He then tied the stick to the donkey so that the carrot was visibly hanging out in front of the donkey's nose but out of reach.

This worked fine. The donkey tried to reach the carrot. As he did so, he put in a good day's work. At the end of the day, the farmer unhitched the donkey, put him in his stall, and fed him a little bit of hay and oats, thinking to himself, "That was a pretty good trick." He put the carrot and the stick on the shelf and went to bed.

Things went well for a short time until one morning, after tieing the stick and the carrot to the donkey in the usual fashion, nothing happened. The donkey didn't move at all.

The farmer was reluctant to go back to the old technique of using the stick on the donkey because he was still sore from the last couple of kicks he had received. He decided to check again with the "Beloved Sage" in case he had misunderstood the earlier instructions in some fashion.

The farmer went back to the "Beloved Sage," told him what had happened that day, and the Sage smiled and said, "I said <u>give</u> him the carrot."

Now the farmer was not a stupid individual. He thought about this and recognized that he hadn't really given the donkey the carrot but had, in a way, promised it to him and then had taken it away. So the farmer went home, gave the donkey a carrot, then hung another one at the end of the stick. The donkey

went to work, putting in another productive day. At the end of each day thereafter, the farmer gave the donkey the carrot. Proceeding in this manner, everything went very well for some time.

The farmer, however, then decided that because carrots were relatively costly he would select the nicest, smallest carrots that he could find and hang these on the end of the stick to give to the donkey. He also decided that since the donkey was doing such a good job, he should be worked a bit longer each day to get a "fair day's work" out of him.

After initiating both of these changes, the farmer discovered that the donkey began working slower and slower and having to rest more. The farmer again decided to consult the "Beloved Sage" for advice.

The "Beloved Sage" listened to the story and said, "It's simple--the size of the carrot must be equal to the amount of work you want done."

The farmer thought about this and concluded that he must use different-size carrots, depending upon the amount of work he wanted the donkey to perform. He started using small carrots when he wanted a little work done. He used large, choice carrots if it was to be a hard job and a long day. Once again, things seemed to settle down between the farmer and the donkey. Both seemed content with their relationship.

Time passed; the farmer prospered, and the donkey wasn't doing badly either.

One day, while they were out working in the fields, the county extension

agent from the local university stopped by and in the course of the conversation said, "By the way, have you heard of the new donkey policy set down by the local rulers?"

"No!" said the farmer; "I haven't."

"Well," said the county agent, "beginning at once, no donkey can be allowed to starve and must be given a subsistence diet." The farmer felt that wasn't a bad law. His donkey certainly was getting more than that now. He was soon rudely awakened, however, for you see he had a most unusual donkey. The donkey had heard the county agent's remarks and thought, "Why should I work like an ass when I'm guaranteed a subsistence diet?" So he quit work.

The farmer was perplexed and angry. He refused to provide the donkey with his daily supply of carrots. The donkey, however, let out the most awful bray you have ever heard--so loud, in fact, that the county agent came running with the local authorities. The result: the donkey got his carrots--not a lot, but enough, considering he didn't have to work; and if he wanted more carrots, he could always work some. At the moment he didn't feel that would occur too often.

The farmer was now really in a bind. The work wasn't getting done, and he had no idea of what he should do. Back he went to the "Beloved Sage," and told him the story. The "Beloved Sage" contemplated the problem and stated, "It's very simple; there are different kinds of carrots."

The farmer thought, "Different kinds of carrots? What could he mean by that?" He was now more confused than ever because he only knew of one kind

of carrot. The farmer went home perplexed and frustrated, not knowing what he should do.

Now a good fable, and more so a parable, should lead us to some conclusions which would be guides to present behavior. Let's see what an analysis of this story might say to us today.

Let's make the story relevant to employer-employee relationships by changing some words and their implications.

For instance, for "Farmer" let's use the word "Employer" and for "Donkey" let's use the word "Worker." For "Stick" let's use "Discipline or Punishment" and for "Kick Back" let's use "Strike" or "Industrial Sabotage." For "Sell the Donkey" let's use the words "Fire the Employee."

For "Carrot" we can use "Money"; and for "Size of the Carrot" we can use "Incentive Pay"; for the "Kinds of Carrots" use "Rewards Other Than Money"; and for "Beloved Sage" (BS. you know), we can use "Behavioral Scientist."

The parable thus becomes a simple representation of the history of industrial relations.

Many managers, in the past, saw the employee as lazy and irresponsible, needing to be controlled and coerced through discipline and punishment in order to make him productive. Thus, managers were often autocratic and insensitive toward employees. They used a "stick" approach.

Later on, managers began to view the employee as an "economic entity" who would be productive if provided a monetary reward. Managers then saw

"money" as the motivator and devised incentive systems to motivate their employees. They used the "carrot" approach.

Presently, we are mindful that employees are in fact human beings; that their reasons for working and for being productive are many and varied--often more than financial. We are now learning that employees can be responsible and can be motivated by the "work itself"; by responsibility; by recognition; and by various psychological rewards. Managers now find that participation and democratic processes can yield more valuable employees. They are expanding the meaning of the carrot.

Today, the "Beloved Sage" is the Behavioral Scientist. We believe that managers need to learn what the behavioral scientists are saying to us as to how to improve work relationships. We need to study McGregor's theories about the nature of man (7) (8); Maslow's theory about man's needs (6); Herzberg's hygiene-motivation theory (3); Likert's "Principle of Supportive Relationships" and his "Linking Pin" Concept (5). We need as well to learn from Argyris (1), Vroom (11), and others.

The purpose of this paper is not to review the contributions of the "beloved sages" just cited, but rather to highlight some basic ideas as a starter.

Managers need to recognize first that the employees with whom we work are not donkeys or asses (even though we all seem to act that way at times). Each person behaves in a manner that he believes is rational and sensible. We are all trying to make sense out of our world, just like the farmer. We are seeking for cause and effect relationships that will give meaning to our behavior.

We must understand cause and effect relationships because we have various needs that must be satisfied. We can achieve satisfaction of these various needs only through our behavior. This is why we describe our behavior as need-oriented.

According to Maslow (6), man's needs can be classified in a hierarchy with five levels. The primary level of needs, those requiring satisfaction first, are man's immediate basic or "physiological" needs for air, food, shelter, rest, etc. Man's second level needs are "security" needs. They represent man's need to provide for physiological needs in the future.

The third level of man's needs can be classified as "social" needs, representing man's need to be accepted by his fellow man.

"Egoistic" needs are the fourth level. They represent man's desire to be accepted by himself and have a good self-image.

The pinnacle of the hierarchy is the fifth and last level which Maslow terms the level of self actualization. This represents man's need to achieve his highest capability, to reach his destiny, to become one's self and fulfill one's calling.

As managers, we should become aware of the multiple needs of our employees and recognize that many can be satisifed by other than financial remuneration. There are different kinds of "carrots"--so to speak.

Money is not, repeat not, a motivator. Money is only a medium of exchange, albeit an exceptional and important one. But, in fact, human beings work to satisfy needs. Some can be satisfied by exchanging dollars for them. Other needs can be satisfied without using money in exchange.

Herzberg believes we are motivated by interesting and challenging work, by responsibility, by recognition for work performed, by opportunities for advancement, and by opportunities for growth as a person (3). As managers, we must "enrich jobs" by providing employees with more interesting, challenging and responsible assignments, by giving them the appropriate recognition for the job performed, or by providing them with new opportunities for growth or advancement.

In summary, we should recognize that a motivated person is one willing to expend energy to achieve some goal or result which is expected to be need-satisfying. Motivation is a two-dimensional concept. One dimension is its direction toward the need one is trying to satisfy. The second dimension is its magnitude, the amount of energy being exerted to achieve the need. The latter can be high or low, depending on the circumstances. In a work environment we hope to arrange the physical facilities and the group work relationships in such a way that each individual is willing to expend a high degree of energy to obtain organizational goals, recognizing that this behavior will result in personal needs being reached and satisfied.

In our story, the farmer used punishment to coerce the donkey to behave. The donkey did work, <u>at first</u>. However, it wasn't due to a desire to achieve the farmer's goals, but to avoid the punishment. There also developed within the donkey a need to get revenge on the farmer. He finally struck out and kicked the farmer. This was satisfying to the donkey, but not conducive to productive effort. Punishment often leads to this end result.

Skinner in his book Beyond Freedom and Dignity says (10) "It is now clear that we must take into account what the environment does to an organism, not only before but after it responds. Behavior is shaped and maintained by its consequences." In other words, behavior is encouraged and occurs in the future when reinforcement and when need satisfaction accrue to the individual as a result of that behavior. We need to develop appropriate reinforcements for the work behavior we desire on the job. Only then will we be assured of getting that behavior exhibited on the job.

We are all personnel managers. When we associate with our families or with our peers at work or on committees, or when we supervise other individuals at work, we are practicing personnel management. We need to remember the fable about the donkey, the stick and the carrot, and remember that discipline, when punitive and not corrective, often leads to non-productive and even destructive behavior by people.

We need managers who can develop work environments with different carrots available to employees--carrots called recognition, challenge, interesting work, responsibility, and growth or advancement.

You, as personnel supervisor, have the reponsibility to learn more about the behavioral scientists' message in developing these motivating environments.

Such motivating environments are essential for satisfying work relationships and effective use of our most important resources, our human resources.

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